

Movie Makers

January-February, 1999

Volume 9 No. 1

The American Motion Picture Society

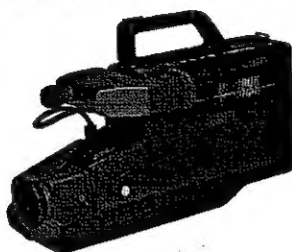
Worst Case Scenarios...and other bad scenes ***by Stan Whitsitt***

OK all you Steven Spielberg wannabes! Gather round! Stan, the old geezer, is working up a head of steam to bitch at you, (since attaining geezerhood, I do a lot of that.)

Today I am fulminating about the story film, or, scenario as we pretentiously call it. They are in the minority of films produced by amateurs, but a high percentage of them have one thing in common...they are boring.

By granny, (I'm in my geezer mode now)...as I recall...about twenty five years ago when I began to make home movies, the Holy Grail of amateurs was lip sync, but they knocked themselves out devising all kinds of weird methods to achieve it scenario type films. If by some stroke of luck, lip sync, or any unreasonable facsimile thereof, was attained, they were guaranteed an award in any contest they chose to enter. The photography could be terrible, the editing worse, the story nonexistent, you name it, if it had lip sync it was a winner.

"O.K. geezer," you ask, "What the hell is it you are trying to tell us?" Since 1927 when the Jazz Singer".



Keep your videos simple.

inaugurated the era of "talkies," amateurs have worshiped at the feet of great god Lip Sync, usually with disastrous results

The lack of technology to achieve lip sync in amateur films has always been the stumbling block. For the edification and enlightenment of home movie makers everywhere I will quote Edmund Spenser from his blockbuster hit "the Faerie Queene," that won an Oscar in 1956 "but times do change and move continually." the electronic imaging industry has given the amateur a technology to do things heretofore possible only for
(Scenes continued on page 3)

What is Art?

Can the productions we create be considered as art? What is "art" anyway? A definition found in many art appreciation books begins with: Art is anything people arrange into order.

So could a table be considered as a piece of art? By this limited definition, yes, a table could be considered as art.

How about a tree? Though beautiful and worthy of appreciation, a tree can't be considered a piece of art since it isn't made by humans.

And there is more to this definition anyway. The definition goes on to state : Art is anything people arrange into order which evokes a response by others. So does that mean a painting hung in a closet considered art? Possibly not. What if someone doesn't appreciate the production you created, does that mean it isn't art? No. Our productions are an arrangement into order which evokes a response by others. It doesn't matter if that response is favorable or not.

So, by the definition established by art educators, the work we labor to produce are considered art.
Matt Jenkins

inside...

From the Editor
Production Tip
VCR and Camcorder Warranties
Ten Tips for Beginning Videographers
Festival Listing

page 2
page 3
page 4
page 5
page 6

Movie Makers

Dedicated to the interests of the Serious Motion Picture Maker.

**Vol. 9 January - February, 1999
No. 1**

MOVIE MAKERS is published bi-monthly on the 25th day of even-numbered months by the AMERICAN MOTION PICTURE SOCIETY and features news and articles of interest to the serious motion picture maker, video or film.

Membership price per year is \$7.00, Canada \$9.00, foreign addresses \$10.00, all payable in U.S. funds or equivalent. Articles may be copied when the source is given. Back copies are available at .80 cents post paid.

**George W. Cushman
Founder,**

Matt Jenkins, Editor

The AMERICAN MOTION PICTURE SOCIETY is not connected with any other organization, society, club or association. The Society does not offer dual, club, nor group memberships.

Address correspondence to the Society, 30 Kanan Rd. Oak Park, CA 91377-1105. E-mail: RGARRETSON1@JUNO.COM.

Officers of the Society: President, Ernest Smith, Salt Lake, Utah; vice President, open; Secretary/ Treasurer, Roger Garretson, Oak Park, California; Directors, Peter Crombie, Oak Lawn, Illinois, Jack Ruddell, Mississauga, Ontario.

SOCIETY REPRESENTATIVES

CANADA, Margaret Chamberlain, 2701 Arbutus Rd, Victoria, BC V8N1W8.

UNITED KINGDOM, Terry Mendoza, P.O. Box 2009, Rochford, Essex SS4 1BF England

From the Editor

As I assemble this issue of the "Movie Makers" the weather here in Oklahoma is turning from 70's to cold and 40's. I know those of you in the northern parts are probably saying "poor baby" as you shovel out after that last snow storm. Actually, Oklahoma could be an ideal location for shooting. The state has a large variety of locales for shooting, the weather is great, prices are cheap, today's gas price for regular unleaded is 69 cents a gallon. The only problem I see preventing Oklahoma from becoming the next "third coast" is the wind. The wind never stops blowing.

After repeated nudging from Roger Garretson I will tell you faithful AMPS members a little about myself. My Masters degree is from Syracuse University. I also hold a Doctor of Education degree as well. I've worked in the TV rep business in N.Y.C. and had a brief stint in advertising in Atlanta. I also produced a highly successful regional sports show for a couple of small markets in the deep south. Now I teach TV production at Cameron University in Lawton, OK. Also, I produce documentaries and fictional work. My documentaries have had been broadcast in Connecticut, in the south, and in Oklahoma. Besides my current course load which includes overseeing five student produced programs a week, I am in preproduction on a documentary regarding the building of a sculpture and trying to put together some funding so I can shoot (in film) a fictional piece that I scripted over the last year.

My philosophy regarding production is simple, shoot more and often but pre-plan as much as possible!

Matt Jenkins

Remember to check the mailing label to see if your membership is going to expire.

Production Tip: A viewfinder hood

Those of you who have a camcorder with a swing out LCD finder, may find this homemade device useful to cut out extraneous light when you use the LCD finder in daylight.

I used a box that contained regular envelopes. This size just fit over the LCS screen on my camcorder. You may have to find a different size box if your screen dimensions are different.

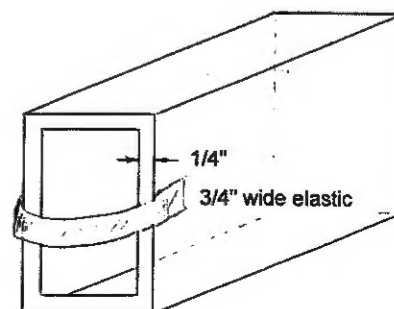
Seal all openings with glue and/or tape. Cut the end off one end of the box. On the opposite end, cut an opening, leaving 1/4" of the box intact.

Staple a piece of elastic, such as used in garments to each side of the box as shown on the sketch. Leave enough slack so that it will loosely fit over the back of the LCD screen.

Spray paint the box with flat paint. The hood is slipped over the end of the screen and is held in place with the elastic. Be careful, the hood is fairly fragile, but if it breaks, just buy another box of envelopes!

Roger Garretson

Remove this end of the box



(Scenes continued from page 1)

the studios of Hollywood. But alas! And alack! The home movie makers have dropped the ball. With all those new capabilities at their fingertips, they are still turning out the same lame stuff they were twenty five years ago (but hey! The lip sync is better.) Nowadays, if one is going to win the contests, lip sync alone will no longer cut the mustard.

Let me start my diatribe by stating the obvious. The scenario, or story film is the most difficult genre to turn out. There are so many interlocking aspects that are not inherent in the reality-based documentary type films, that most amateur producers have trouble tying them all together into a coherent product. So, when you plan to do such a film, count on many times the volume of work you expend on your regular productions. If you don't, forget it! You will end up with a turkey.

Considering what I have seen as a judge over the years, and discussion with other film makers, the greatest weakness of most scenarios is the quality of the acting. Unless the film maker has a pool of trained actors to draw from, he has a tough row to hoe. Usually the actors are family members, friends, or members of his movie club. They are willing but do not have the necessary skills. This lack of skill manifests itself in a self conscious demeanor that kills the credibility of the scene. They also have difficulty in achieving the timing so necessary in dialogue, leaving dead air between segments of the conversation.

These weaknesses can be overcome if the film maker lays out on paper, what he wants beforehand, and impresses on his actors, just what he wants the scene to convey. Here is where the extra work involved in a scenario comes into play. Extensive rehearsal, and more rehearsal is necessary. One glorious

advantage of video is that a scene can be shot and reviewed immediately, pointing out the weaknesses, then re-shot on the spot. With tape, re-takes can be shot until it is right,...without breaking the bank. In 16mm with film costing \$30.00 a minute, re-takes must be kept to a minimum. Most of my scenarios were shot on regular 8mm when film was \$3.00 a roll and I could afford to shoot a scene several times if necessary.

One of the amateur actor's most common practices to screw up a scene, is looking at the camera during the action. Nothing labels your production "HOME MOVIE" (horrors!) quicker than one of your subjects looking at the camera with that "Hi Mom" expression. Of course that is one pitfall to avoid. Just threaten to shatter the kneecap of anyone caught looking at the camera while the red light is on.

Over the years I have told my readers on hundreds of occasions (on second thought, maybe it was five or six times,) to adhere to the KISS (keep it simple stupid) principle as often as possible. As you write the script, remember your audience will not have lived with the project for months as you have, and may not pick up on the the subtle nuances of the story unless they are skillfully crafted. In keeping with the capability of your actors, make the story clear and straightforward, so the audience doesn't have to try to guess what meaning the film is trying to convey. Avoid convoluted plots. This characteristic is most noticeable in student films. As students craft their obscure themed films, I am sure they are so familiar with what they want the film to say, they don't realize the audience may need more explicit guidance, to get anything from their story. On many a judging sheet I have written, "Overall, very good production values, but what are you trying to tell me?"

In addition to all the foregoing verbiage, the basic rules of film making, that we have been preaching for years, applies to the scenario as well as the documentary, only more so. The editing phase is much more critical in a scenario. As I have pointed out many times in my verbal tantrums, "less is better." The amateur seems to have a pathological reluctance to discard any of his precious footage. They seem hell bent on telling the audience more than it needs, or wants to know. An example or two. Picture this: The scene calls for a person to get into an auto and drive away.

1. We see the subject walking across the lawn,
2. we see him approach the car,
3. we see him open the door,
4. we see him get in the seat,
5. we see him close the door,
6. we see him fasten his belt,
7. we see him start the engine,
8. we see him drive away...finally. We know what he's going to do, but before he finishes the driving away act, we are saying to ourselves, "get in the damn car, and get on with the story." Such a scene could consume as much as fifteen seconds, could have conveyed to the audience the same relevant information in a three or four second interval.

In another film, that won a number of trophies, a scene called for a person to get on the roof of his house. We had to sit through his getting the ladder, putting it up, adjusting it, and climbing on the roof. In this instance, the act of leaning the ladder against the roof would and a cut to him on the roof would have given the same information. Unless there is something relevant to the story in the minutiae of an action, the story will have a smoother flow if extraneous details are omitted. If you need to tell the time

(Scenes continued on Page 4.)

(Scenes continued from page 3)
don't describe the process of making a watch.

There are many books written on crafting a story on film, but you and I do not have unlimited time or money to produce a feature film. Remember guys, we are in it for the fun and glory, not the money.

In keeping with my usual practice, I will now summarize the forgoing profound pronouncements for the benefit of the slow learners, the fast forgetters, and the folks who always read the last chapter of a book first, to learn whodunit.

1. The one thing that will improve a scenario more than anything, yet seems to be missing from most efforts, is the rehearsal of its actors. This is hard, time consuming work.
2. Coupled with extensive rehearsal, the producer must be able to do as many takes as necessary to get the scene right. Remember tape is quick...and cheap.
3. Avoid convoluted plots, and shape the story to be easily followed by an audience.
4. Editing must be tighter than that used in a documentary style film.
5. Finally avoid "cute." I didn't mention it earlier, but am offering it in the event I am to be one of the judges for your film...I hate cute!

There you have it! The Geezer's recipe for a successful scenario. As the Good Book says, "go forth and do thou likewise." Here's hoping your efforts will get a "thumbs up" instead of the finger.

My wife, as she proof read this remarked, "You're critical in this article. Aren't you afraid some of those movie folks will inflict serious pain on your aging body?" I gently explained I am invoking my cardinal rule for self preservation and survival. I never criticize a film maker until I have walked a mile in his moccasins...then I am a mile away and I have his shoes. In this instance I don't have your shoes, but even better, I am 2,000

TECHNICAL

By Jim Beach

VCR AND CAMCORDER WARRANTIES -- ARE THEY IMPORTANT? ARE EXTENDED WARRANTIES WORTHWHILE?

The answer to the first question is a definite yes. Read on to see why. The answer to the second question is maybe. Read on for the pros and cons.

VCRs and Camcorders are very complex machines combining electrical, electronic and mechanical systems with thousands of components. In camcorders, two or three optical systems are also integrated with the other systems. For the most part they are highly reliable and self protective against pushing the wrong button. If treated with care they will perform well for a long time.

Why then is the usual 90 day or sometimes one year warranty important? Experience has shown that the failure rate of electronic, and to some extent complex mechanical components, is highest in the first few weeks of usage. In aerospace electronics it is called "infant mortality."

It is important then to use the Camcorder or VCR extensively while it is still under warranty and to activate all of its features. Putting it on the AC adapter and leaving it turned on for several days will serve as a "burn in" for some electronic components. Many components, however, are not fully energized and the mechanical systems are not activated at all. Using it extensively while it is new is best and has the added benefit of familiarizing you with its features.

Many dealers will honor an immediate exchange for a new unit if trouble occurs in the first week or so of delivery. I had this experience several years ago. Two weeks after delivery, and two days before a scheduled trip to Turkey, my camcorder failed to record.

Playback worked fine. My dealer gave me a new one.

The answer is, extended warranties probably are not worthwhile on a dollar and sense basis but there is more to it than that. Extended warranties are expensive and probably are not justified on most VCRs and low to moderate priced camcorders. If you buy "high end," meaning expensive and loaded with features, VCRs, and specially camcorders, the extended warranty usually does not cost much more but the cost of possible repairs can be very high. Also the more features it has the more parts it has to fail. It is like insurance. If you do not need it, it was a waste of money but if you do have need it was a wise decision. It is a decision only you can make. If you go for it be sure you know where and how the warranty will be honored. Preferably it should be by a factory authorized repair shop or your major dealer. You may be able to reduce its cost as the dealer has a good mark up on extended warranties. Since you are going to need spare batteries, tapes and possibly other things, try to get a package deal including the extended warranty. Get the best price you can on the big item before you ask for the package price. It usually gets you the extended warranty for not much more. If that dealer does not work with you go elsewhere.

From this you probably have guessed that I usually go for the extended warranty. I have owned 7 camcorders and 4 VCRs, all but 2 were high end items and most have had extended warranties. One camcorder remote was replaced under ext'd.warranty. I have had 3 other camcorder failures. Two were replaced free in the first few weeks. The third had a broken part. A friend had borrowed the camcorder and tried to put the tape in backward. Out of warranty it cost \$150 for labor. The part was free. Two VCR failures were beyond warranty.

Extended Warranties do not make dollar sense just peace of mind when expensive items are involved.

Ten Tips for Beginning videographers (and others too!)

by Howard Lockwood

(PART ONE OF TWO PARTS)

1. CHOOSE YOUR EQUIPMENT CAREFULLY AND LEARN TO USE IT

Your most important choice is in a camcorder. Hi8 is the biggest seller, followed by Super VHS-C. More advanced (and affluent!) shooters are going to digital camcorders. Talk to other users for recommendations. retail store clerks are usually of minimum help. Features you may wish to have are manual adjustment of exposure and "jacks" for remote mike and earphones. "Optical Image Stabilization," to reduce shakiness is very desirable, as is a color viewfinder.

But consider your camcorder to be only piece in your system. Having at least one acceptable VCR is essential to edit. Super VHS is recommended. (Advanced videographers are going to "non-linear editing" using various computers or similar equipment, e.g. Casablanca, costing about \$6,000!) You will need a monitor or TV, and preferably one with S-VHS capability. And, you will need an "audio mixer" if you wish to add voice with narration, and a "titler" if you want somewhat fancy titles, but this is not a first essential (titling may be included in other equipment.)

2 THINK OF YOUR AUDIENCE

your aim in making a video is generally to make one others will **enjoy**. But audiences vary immensely. Your family may be delighted with a video of the granddaughter's birthday party, a 50th anniversary, or other family history. but a general audience will most likely be bored, especially if they do not know the people. Some subjects are very specific to a limited audience, (e.g. "The Art of Tying Flies".) General audiences are likely to enjoy travelogues or documentaries, if

the subject is fairly unusual (but avoid inaugurated the era of "talkies," amateurs have worshiped at the feet of great god Lip Sync, usually with disastrous results what looks like a home movie, "This is Emma eating Lunch.") Videographers who can tell a story well (a "scenario"), whether serious or humorous, often hold attention.

As you make your video, keep asking yourself, "**What is it about this video which could cause others to be interested?**" If you make a video only because the subject interests you, don't be surprised if you have an admiring audience of only one!

3. PLAN AHEAD

Before you go out to shoot, try to learn about the subject. Be alert as to what to look for, the scenes you surely want. don't get home and find you missed one of the most important sights. If you make a "scenario," you will, of course, have to have a script to shoot to.

Your planning has to include the equipment you will need. A check list is recommended. Above all, have plenty of battery power! Have at least two, preferably three. Carry equipment to charge batteries overnight, or from the car cigarette lighter. And, it's not silly, take plenty of tape.

4. AVOID COMMON BEGINNER SHOOTER MISTAKES

you will improve immensely if you avoid these mistakes:

Fast and frequent panning and tilting

- Some beginners wave the camera around as if it were a spray gun. Panning (moving from side to side) and tilting (moving up and down) have their place, and are used in commercial productions. But start with about four

seconds on the scene, and then move **very slowly** across it, and hold on the end about four seconds. Do not pan or tilt too frequently. And never pan (or tilt) across the scene and back again.

Fast and frequent zooming - The zoom is a fun feature, not to be overused! It is sometimes effective to start in close on a subject (e.g. a face in the crowd) and then **very slowly** zoom out to show the whole crowd. or start on a wide angle and zoom in. but it should be so slow as to be almost imperceptible—unless you are trying to create a dazzling special effect! Never **zoom in and zoom out in the same shot.**

A Shaky camera - This is very distracting. In many cases you almost have to make hand held shots. "image stabilization" can help reduce the shakes." There is much less likely shaking with wide angle, than when you move in with telephoto. Then it is almost impossible to avoid the shakes. The next best thing is to carry a "monopod," which may help, but for rock steady shots, even at maximum telephoto **use a tripod**. Tripods can be a heavy awkward nuisance, but if you mainly want a still picture, and will not be panning or tilting, a very light tripod will suffice. To avoid shaking the camera on the beginning or end of a shot, a remote control will help.

Showing the date and time - Unless you are shooting some event where it is highly desirable to establish the date and time (e.g. a Rodney King beating!) don't use it in your pictures. Where it can be helpful is to keep on the lens cap, show the date, and run the camera for a few seconds. Then shoot a few more seconds with it off. This helps

(**Tips continued on page 6.**)

(Tips continued from page 5)

establish for you in the future when the footage was shot.

5. VARY YOUR SHOTS TO ADD INTEREST.

"Variety is the spice of life" and of making an interesting movie.

Use different distances - It is virtually a truism to start with a wider angle "establishing" shot, to tell us where we are (e.g. the Grand Canyon!) Then a closer up shot, maybe people mounting the mules, then one person in particular, and then a close-up of that person's face (a look of sheer terror!) Do not repeat this sequence mechanically, or it will become boring and predictable. The one thing you can do to most add interest to your videos is to get close-ups. Sometimes very close up.

Use different heights - It is natural to just shoot from eye level. Or tripod level. However, note that the pros in commercial television vary the height, from even floor level (often a dramatic effect,) to waist level (perhaps even for small children,) on up to overheads, either by raising the camera overhead, or finding a higher vantage point.

Look for action - There have been prize winning videos made which are in

effect no more than slide shows, almost all still pictures. However, one adage is **"Movies should move."** Even if you are shooting something static you can create a feeling of movement by a slow pan or tilt (a la Ken Burns, master documentary maker.)

6. LET THERE BE LIGHT!

You get the best picture when there is good light. However, if you are shooting in bright sunlight be very aware of sharp contrasts. A face that is half in sun and in half in shade will not look goof. Pros use reflectors to get even light. A simpler solution, however, is shooting in shade if possible. Shooting with the sun behind the subject presents another problem ("backlighting.") Your camera in automatic exposure will set itself for the bright background and the person you are shooting will be a silhouette. To avoid this, use the "Back Light" feature in your camera, if it has one, change the exposure manually, if you can. Or perhaps you can get the subject to move to avoid a bright background. A similar effect will be noted shooting in the snow.

While video cameras can be very sensitive in low light situations, if you have to tell the viewer, "There's a dog back there somewhere!" Don't use the scene!

Shooting inside, artificial light may be appropriate. Cheap clamp-on incandescent shop lights are pretty effective. A light on the camera itself is

moderately acceptable, if the light is fairly diffused. Shooting your lights at a ceiling to get softer deflected light is sometimes desirable. Experiment!

7. MAKE INTERESTING AND READABLE TITLES

Opening titles are an essential and simple ones are easy to make. At the least, you can type out a title in bold caps, or use a computer for fancier letters, print it out in black on colored paper and shoot in close. Sometimes a piece of printed material, like the face of a travel brochure will suffice. A sign at the entry of a national park may serve. Some camcorders have built-in titlers, which allow you to superimpose a title over a picture. (Look, Ma!) Much better titles can be made with a titler. Try to give your titles a little spark, not just "The Grand Canyon" but maybe, "Daring the Grand Canyon."

If you put anything on the screen to be read, make sure it is readable! Don't put something on the screen and say, "I know you can't read this but..." Even with titlemakers, some printing is easier to read than others. There should be good contrast with the background. Jammed up letters with outlines are often more difficult to read. Too much reading to be done should be avoided. Opinions vary, but putting credits at the end does not detract from or delay the opening.

(Part TWO IN THE NEXT ISSUE.)

Upcoming Festivals

Close Date	Festival Name & Address	Open to:	Subject	Formats	Time Limit	Entry Fee	Award	Show Dates
5-31-99	Mill Valley Film Festival % Film Institute of No. Calif. 38 Miller Av. Ste 6, Mill Valley, CA 94941	G	G	LM	NONE	\$20	W	N/A
3-17-99	Mississippi Valley Int'l Video Festival, 822 Limoge Dr. Manchester, MO 63021-6605-Joan Winslow	AD	G	M	20 MIN	\$8 No Ret \$12 w/ret	UV	N/A
7-24-99	PSA Int'l Video Festival %Bill Buchanan FPSA 19186 Kingsville, Detroit, MI 48225-2142	AD	G	M (NTSC)	n/a	\$8 \$12 returned	UV	N/A
N/A Not Announced or Not Available Please include a self addressed stamped envelope with your entry request								
A Non Commercial B College Student C Hi Sch Gr Sch	D Independant E Commercial F Restricted	G Open H S8 J 16mm	K Other L 3/4 " M VHS	N SVHS O 8mm P Hi8	Q Invitatat'l R Regional S Exceptions	T Cash U Trophies V Certificate	W Other Award X Approximate Y It Varies	